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Statement submitted by International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being
circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council
resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

In recent years awareness of abuse of older persons has increased, prompted in part by the recent COVID-19 crisis, yet little positive concrete action appears to have resulted. Levels of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation remain unacceptably high across the world. Societally we need to develop concerted actions to counter all forms of violence and abuse towards older persons, and in particular older women, who are the most affected, wherever and whenever it occurs.

The recent report of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, on Violence against, abuse and neglect of older persons, which was presented to the Human Rights Council in September 2023, described manifestations and categories of abuse which have been developed mostly by health and social care professionals largely in Europe and North America. These are: physical abuse, emotional/psychological abuse, financial/economic abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. In the report the Independent Expert added a category of verbal abuse and hate speech against older persons, which is an important element of many abusive situations and which may have particularly adverse and deleterious effects on older women as the largest sector of the population of older people.

In the first, WHO and INPEA multi-country study which compared perceptions of elder abuse by older persons and those of primary health care professionals in 8 countries, and was conducted in 2002, older persons considered abuse to fall within three broad categories:

- Neglect: isolation, abandonment, and social exclusion
- Violation of rights: human, legal and medical
- Deprivation of: choices, decision making, status, finances, and respect.

Poverty, socio-economic factors and gender were crucial factors identified in the study as being critically involved in abuse and abusive situations; thus abuse of older women is an important issue in need of urgent attention. Intersectional issues are of key concern in this aspect.

Subsequent surveys and studies concerning abuse of older women, have reaffirmed the assertion that older persons see structural/societal abuse and violation of rights as causing direct harm to their wellbeing.

The home environment has been most studied to date is that of the home. Within this context, attention is paid to situations involving close interpersonal relationships, such as families, friends, caregivers and neighbours as potential perpetrators, which may especially affect older women. However, concealing situations that involve providers of public, private or community services. An expansion of knowledge and understanding of the problem would avoid limiting the field of abuse of older persons to being perceived as simply involving an intra-family dynamic or a caregiving issue. Abuse can occur in any situation in which there is an older person.

While dividing abuse of older persons into categories or types is useful for research, in many cases, one type of abuse does not occur in isolation; two or more types of abuse can take place at the same time. Psychological abuse occurs most often in conjunction with others. Any type of abuse is likely to cause physical, psychological, material/financial or social harm (such as isolation): there may be immediate or enduring consequences. For example, when a person experiences physical violence or economic abuse, risk of severe and major emotional consequences is high, as well there being an elevated risk of adverse social consequences. As there are more older women than older men, both in overall population terms (age-related) and concerning those who are affected by or at risk of

experiencing abuse, neglect and/or exploitation, these consequences are of particular concern in relation to the health (including mental health) and well-being of older women.

When calling for increased protection may result in increased stigma, perpetuation of stereotypes (of older persons as frail, dependent or vulnerable) or even lead to a violation of the autonomy and human rights of individuals. The balance between increasing protection and promoting empowerment should reflect that not all older persons have the same needs and preferences. However, all older persons should have rights safeguarded. Whilst the domains of public health, social care and human rights frequently overlap, the lack of an active integration of human rights principles in services for older persons hampers effective prevention, resolution, and remedy.

Recognizing abuse and violence as constituting a human rights violation focuses attention on governments' legal obligations to comply with signed treaties and commitments. The prevention of violence, abuse and neglect of older women is part of governments' responsibilities to care for all people, including those in the later stages of their lives.

Abuse, lack of autonomy and serious, sometimes systematic violations that happen in institutions, is largely understudied and under monitored; consequently, there may also be a lack of interventions and responses to institutional abuse. A Norway study showed that 76% of nursing staff observed at least one incident of abuse/neglect committed by staff, and 60.3% of staff admitted perpetrating at least one incident of abuse/neglect the past year.

As there are more (older) women than men who live in such institutions the effects and impacts of abuse and neglect may be far more marked for women and the lack of attention and appropriate responses to these issues is notable.

Older persons experience harm from natural and man-made disasters and their exclusion from humanitarian assistance, research and emergency preparedness, amounts to neglect and structural abuse. Humanitarian handbooks and guidelines state that in emergencies, older persons are at higher risk of violence, including sexual and domestic abuse; exploitation by family members and more and older women may be far more likely to experience violence and abuse. However, we lack hard data to demonstrate the extent of the problem or to prove the correlation between the abuse suffered and increased mortality and morbidity of older people, and in particular older women, in these situations. When some data is available, the knowledge derived from data analysis is not necessarily translated into appropriate actions and practice that might work to both prevent situations, to intervene appropriately and to afford protection, where necessary.

Ageism and age-based discrimination are at the root of the violence, abuse and neglect that older persons experience in different forms, and in all settings, both in the community and institutions, as we sadly witnessed during the COVID 19 pandemic. During the pandemic, levels of violence, abuse and neglect increased both at home and in institutions. A US study established that during COVID-19 the prevalence of elder abuse rose by 83.6%. Another study indicates numbers of calls to support lines in Ontario Canada rose by 250%. But besides limited data from a small number of countries, and some sensationalist headlines, elder abuse remains a taboo. Violence, abuse and neglect of older persons are deeply rooted in societal ageism. It is also apparent in the negative portrayal of older persons in the media and in harmful traditional practices against older persons, particularly older women.

Ageism should not be tolerated and should be treated seriously as other forms of discrimination. A human rights-based approach is the only appropriate framework to challenge ageism effectively. There is a need to change the portrayal and treatment

of older persons, and in particular older women, through societal change anchored in national, regional, and international policies and legal frameworks.

Up until now, existing international, and national human rights legal frameworks have failed to ensure older persons' rights are protected and have failed to sufficiently protect older persons, including older women, from all types of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.

A new UN convention on the rights of older persons is urgently needed to provide a solid foundation for effective national laws, policies, research, service delivery and necessary attitudinal and behavioural changes concerning later life, old age and women's experiences of aging. Adequate legal frameworks that recognize abuse of older persons as a human rights violation would encourage older individuals to seek help and/or to report abuse with confidence that they would be taken seriously, and their needs addressed. We need a solid, legal foundation to end systemic ageism and challenge/confront elder abuse in all its forms.

We need to raise awareness of all sectors of society and all generations, including younger women that we all have the same rights and that we should all age free of discrimination and free from violence, abuse and neglect. Full attention must be paid to addressing the inequalities experienced by older women and preventing the violations of human rights they face throughout the world. Increased support from all sectors representing the needs of women (UN Women, Commission on the Status of Women) is essential.
